

Rebels in Iraq kill people, then booby-trap them

By [DAVE HIRSCHMAN](#) | Saturday, July 16, 2005, 06:58 AM

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Mahmudiyah, Iraq — The deadliest weapons of the Iraqi insurgency — roadside bombs — are growing in size and sophistication and are being hidden in a bewildering variety of places.

Buried under patched asphalt on narrow country lanes, embedded in dog carcasses on highways, hung from overpasses or burrowed into the soft embankments beside irrigation canals, “improvised explosive devices,” or IEDs, are the most feared and common threats to U.S. troops.

Now, the ongoing cat-and-mouse game between insurgents who build and plant IEDs and the American bomb disposal experts who disarm them has taken a ghoulish turn. Insurgents have begun hiding bombs in the corpses of murder victims in an effort to kill people who retrieve the bodies and those who try to defuse the bombs.

“The IEDs are becoming more potent all the time,” said Staff Sgt. John Mason, 31, leader of a two-man explosives ordnance disposal team assigned to the Georgia Army National Guard’s 48th Brigade Combat Team. “The insurgents who make them are getting smarter, so we have to get smarter, too.”

Of the 323 American combat deaths in Iraq since the start of the year, 165, just over 51 percent, have been caused by IEDs, according to the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, an independent Web site that tracks deaths in Iraq.

On a recent morning in Mahmudiyah, a city just south of Baghdad, Sgt. Mason and Pfc. Brian James, 28, both members of the 717th Ordnance Company based at Fort Campbell, Ky., were called to three IED sites before noon. The final one would prove to be the trickiest and most dangerous: a series of artillery shells wired to the body of one of five men killed execution-style and dumped beside a rural irrigation canal.

The bomb team’s day had started in the heart of Mahmudiyah, where an Iraqi soldier reported a suspicious-looking white sedan parked near a mosque.

James unloaded a “Talon” robot, a surprisingly speedy tracked vehicle that looks like a department store toy. The camera-toting robot is the favored method for getting up-close looks at bombs without soldiers getting too close.

The driver steers the robot with a computer joy stick while watching a computer screen.

After other soldiers blocked traffic and cleared the area, James guided the robot to the suspicious car and used its mechanical arm to drop a thermite grenade into a side window.

The grenade quickly set the car afire and set off the hidden explosives inside with a series of destructive blasts.

It takes about a year of intensive training for U.S. soldiers to become explosives experts. About 60 percent of those who start the rigorous program wash out, Mason said.

In Iraq, bomb disposal experts serve six-month tours, half the length of the typical Army tour, because their work is so stressful.

They typically work 24-hour shifts — one full day on duty followed by a full day off.

But the workload here has been so heavy lately that the teams sometimes are called into action on their days off.

Man replaces robot

The morning car bomb was dispatched quickly and with only one casualty — the Talon.

The robot's mechanical arm got stuck on the burning car's door and caught fire. Mason and James had to replace it with a new robot on their next mission, and that's when the real trouble started.

The two soldiers were wary when they arrived at the rural execution site in the midafternoon heat.

Despite the verdant farmland and 6-foot sunflowers that lined the route, Mason said he had a bad feeling about the mission. Would they face an ambush along the vulnerable canal road? Was the killing site mined?

It is widely believed that insurgents have placed a bounty on American explosives experts, who are frequently targeted by insurgents using guns, mortars and secondary IEDs.

One of the five bodies found at the site was wired with explosives. When James dispatched the replacement robot toward it, the team quickly ran into technical problems.

The new robot's video images came back garbled and useless.

Mason would have to investigate the grisly scene himself.

Despite the searing 118-degree heat, he donned a stifling, four-piece protective suit that left him looking like a leaden Pillsbury Doughboy. A Kevlar helmet, yellow sunglasses, earplugs and gloves completed the cumbersome outfit.

Mason carried a telescoping metal pole with a hook at one end in case he needed to move anything.

Sgt. Guillermo Thorne, a member of the 1st Battalion, 108th Armor Regiment, who was providing security for the team, marveled at Mason's willingness to approach a live bomb.

"Whatever they pay you, it's not enough," Thorne said. "You're absolutely, without a doubt, nuts."

Life-or-death moment

A few minutes later, Mason saw what the faulty robot could not show them. One of the decomposing bodies was attached to a homemade, remote-controlled detonator. That was connected to a length of electrical cord linked to a series of artillery shells.

Knowing that a lookout with a cell phone could trigger the bomb at any moment, Mason extended the hook to its full length and reached for the detonation cord.

He hoped to sever it from the explosives. But he also knew it might be wired to go off if moved, so he crouched low as he began to pull.

The remote control moved about four inches before an artillery shell exploded.

The blast engulfed Mason in smoke and dust and left him sprawled on the ground.

A member of Mason's security team started to rush toward him, sure that he had been injured or killed. But Mason quickly stood and waved him off.

The concussion "went right through me," he said later. His ears were ringing and he was covered with dust and debris, but he was alive.

"The only time I was really scared was after the explosion when I couldn't hear anything and felt a trickle running down my neck," Mason said. "I was afraid it was blood and that I'd busted my eardrums. But it was just sweat."

He collected the detonator, carried it back to his vehicle a few hundred yards away and shed his protective suit.

"Jesus, you scared me with that one," James told Mason.

"Yeah," Mason replied. "Scared myself, too."

After a drink of water and a 15-minute pause, the married father of two got back into his protective suit and returned to the gruesome bomb site.

Only one artillery shell had exploded. The rest were still dangerous.

Mason placed a plastic explosive next to the remaining shells and slowly walked away.

He yelled "Fire in the hole!" and detonated the shells with a violent roar that shook the ground hundreds of yards away.

Amazingly, the five bodies remained mostly intact.

"I'm glad the families will have something to bury," Mason said. "I know that's important in this culture."

On the trip back to their base, Mason resumed his teasing banter with James.

"No IED is going to kill me," he said. "Your driving, dude. That's what's going to kill me."

For James and Mason, it was all in a day's work.

"Not many people do what we do," said Mason, who formerly served as a crew chief on Black Hawk helicopters.

"We keep other soldiers from getting killed or injured, and that gives us a lot of satisfaction. Even after a day like today, I'd much rather do this than work on helicopters."